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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BEIRUT 001803

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SUBJECT: LEBANON: KHAWAJI BRISTLES AT CRITICISM OF RUSSIAN
MIG DEAL

Classified By: Ambassador Michele J. Sison, for reasons 1.4
(b) and (d).

SUMMARY

1. (C) Accepting a last-minute December 18 meeting to discuss Russia's offer of 10 MiG-29 fighter jets, Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) Commander Jean Kahwaji received visiting NEA Deputy Assistant Secretary (DAS) David Hale, Ambassador, visiting NEA Lebanon Desk Officer Matthew Irwin, and LTC James Johnson of Embassy Beirut's Office of Defense Cooperation in his office at the LAF's Yarze headquarters. Kahwaji rejected U.S. concerns about the MiG deal, stating he'd always been clear about the LAF's need for fixed-wing aircraft for close air support. End Summary.

OFFENSE IS THE BEST DEFENSE

2. (C) After exchanging pleasantries, Kahwaji became quickly defensive, saying "I always said I needed fixed-wing aircraft. Murr (Defense Minister Elias Murr, who announced the MiG deal during his visit to Moscow) knows that I need fixed-wing aircraft and helicopters. But I never asked for MiGs! I asked for old planes like our Hawker Hunters." Kahwaji implored DAS Hale not to worry that the MiGs would be used against Palestinian camps, but reiterated the LAF's need for close air support. Maintaining that he'd had no advance notice of the MiG offer, Kahwaji said he asked Murr to request helicopters and T-72 tanks in Moscow, but that the Russians had been more generous than expected. "MiG-29s are a very big thing, a very good thing! And they offered T-90s instead of T-72s! If the Russians ask for money, the Saudis will pay."

3. (C) Working to temper Kahwaji's enthusiasm, Hale explained that the United States understood the morale boost afforded by the MiG announcement and that nothing would be said publicly to disparage the deal, but outlined U.S. skepticism of the LAF's need for MiGs and ability to afford spare parts and maintenance. Hale also expressed disappointment at Murr's public but indirect swipe at the United States on Russian television wherein Murr asserted that the LAF had sought help from Russia because "other countries" had provided too little assistance too late. Dismissing Murr's remarks, Kahwaji said the MiGs changed nothing about the

LAF's relationship with the United States. "Wait to talk to Minister Murr when he returns. I'm sure he'll be able to explain."

14. (C) Growing increasingly agitated, Kahwaji asked his assistant to fetch a cellular phone from his desk, saying "I'll call Minister Murr for you right now." Explaining to Murr by phone that "Ambassador Hale and Ambassador Sison have come to talk about the MiGs," the two conversed for several minutes. Hanging up the phone, Kahwaji relayed Murr's story.

Having rejected a long list of items offered by Russia "because he didn't want to upset the United States," Murr had mentioned MiGs as a seemingly ludicrous request when asked by the Russians what he really wanted. "I am proud to have gotten something from the Russians," said Kahwaji. "Now it's up to the United States to see what it can give us quickly."

COMMENT

15. (C) We had no intention of chastising Kahwaji over the MiG deal, of which we understood he had no prior knowledge, but he was clearly expecting a tongue-lashing. Kahwaji was particularly prickly when challenged about the LAF's need for a system as expensive and seemingly ill-suited to the LAF's needs as the MiG-29. After months of expressing frustration with what he views as the relatively slow pace of U.S. equipment deliveries and accusations by Hizballah that Israel holds a veto over U.S. assistance to the LAF, Kahwaji was suffused with pride, as we imagine were most of his troops, by the MiG offer. Despite his enthusiasm less than 48 hours

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after the offer was announced by Murr in Moscow, Kahwaji, a man who knows intimately the LAF's needs and constraints, may well adopt a more reasonable position on the MiGs. We also took note of his final comment, an indication that he and the LAF may be looking to be "bought out" of the MiG deal via a competing U.S. offer. We will do nothing to imply that such an offer may be forthcoming.

16. (U) This message has been cleared by DAS Hale.

SISON